

## FEATURE

*The Historical Presidency***“No Man Is Big Enough”: President Harding's  
Defense of the Proto-Modern Executive**

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*Warren Harding's administration was not, as is widely perceived, a failed experiment in executive whiggism but a surprisingly spirited defense of presidential authority against the strongest anti-executive backlash since Reconstruction. His support for active-interventionist conservatism and a modified style of “steward” leadership separated him from his traditionalist Republican predecessors—William McKinley and William H. Taft—and successor—Calvin Coolidge. Ambitiously, Harding sought to fuse elements of the Roosevelt–Wilson experiments in presidential leadership with his own, less egocentric view of “balanced” constitutional government. His adaptability helped maintain the expansion of the administrative state and of the “institutional” and “rhetorical” aspects of presidential power, albeit at more modest rates than under Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. By initiating, or further enabling, growth trends in cabinet government, media influence, and institutional reform, he developed operational templates used by later Republican presidents, notably, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. Rather than being dismissed as irrelevant, therefore, Harding's tenure should be credited both for its innovation and flexibility at a time of institutional crisis and for its contribution to the development of post-1930s Republican presidential leadership.*

A general consensus exists among historians and political scientists that a proto-modern presidency emerged during the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt (TR; 1901–1909) and Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921). Their active-interventionist styles trialled a more personalized, institutionally powerful, and politically independent executive than the “dignified,” restrained, and party-dependent presidencies of the late nineteenth century. Roosevelt adapted the Jacksonian concept of the presidency as the “steward” of

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the public interest, with its unique electoral mandate conferring upon it not only the ability but the *duty* to define and enunciate “national” values and goals. Wilson believed that the reforms needed for the government to tackle the growing socioeconomic inequality and complexity of the nation could be provided only by an executive branch capable of directing or bypassing the corrupted political system, which, in its decentralized, slow-moving operations, was ill suited to modern governance. This proto-modern model, it is generally believed, fell into abeyance after 1920, partly due to a sharp congressional reaction against executive power and partly to Wilson’s conservative Republican successors. Wilsonian “presidentialism” only became entrenched under Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), whose actions permanently shifted the Washington power balance in the executive’s favor.

The weakness of this interpretation has always been its oversimplification of the Wilson–FDR transition period from 1921 to 1933 (conventionally presented as a period of abdicated presidential power) and, particularly, the dismissal of the Warren Harding administration’s contribution to the survival and further development of the proto-modern presidency. Rash and severe errors of political judgment by TR and Wilson, straining both party unity and institutional stability, had provoked a backlash in Congress and both major parties. By 1920, pressure from conservatives was growing for a system correction, reasserting congressional control of policy making and restoring parties as the main articulators of voter interests. The political character of the victorious candidate in the 1920 election was, therefore, unusually important. Taking office at a moment of uncertainty over the presidency’s future character and role, Harding’s actions, whether in restraining or expanding executive power, would substantially influence the depth and longevity of the anti-executive backlash. A passive “whig” leader, reflecting the distrust of executive power that characterized the old Whig Party, might be expected to abandon many of the TR–Wilson innovations, while an overtly “steward”-style presidency would struggle in a hostile political environment, possibly prolonging the congressional backlash. History’s conventional assessment is that Harding, a conservative senator critical of Wilson’s “excesses,” launched 12-year retardation of executive power, surrendering the political initiative to Republican leaders in Congress and deliberately lowering the profile and prestige of his office. In fact, Harding’s reputation as “passive and uninterested in the details of government” is as flawed as the dismissal of his record as a failed exercise in political nostalgia (Genovese 2000, 122). This article contends that, far from being the “McKinley-esque” leader Republicans marketed in 1920, Harding proved to be a pragmatic modernizer who maintained key elements of the TR–Wilson “revolution” in presidential power and was receptive to intervention and reform in ways uncharacteristic either of past whig-style presidents or of his immediate conservative predecessors William McKinley and William Howard Taft. Far from being disengaged from the debate over executive power, Harding internalized the “whig” versus “steward” dilemma so completely that it consumed his short administration as he searched for a workable compromise between the two. His problems lay less in his reputed intellectual limitations than in the inability of a fractured Congress to unite behind his leadership and the failure of Republican leaders to heed his warnings that, as president, he would defend executive prerogatives as energetically as he had defended those of Congress. This failure of communication generated 28 months of

confrontation, as Harding prioritized his own agenda and the advice of his “Best Minds” cabinet over congressional opinion, pursued institutional reform, and exploited the growing power of the “rhetorical presidency” to manipulate public opinion. By consistently defending his office from the worst of the anti-executive backlash, while struggling to rebalance interbranch relations, Harding should be identified as a forward-looking, if modified, steward president, not a regressive whig.

### Political Context: The “Whig” Campaign of 1920

In his 1913 *Autobiography*, Theodore Roosevelt claimed a broad natural field for executive intervention, arguing it should only be restrained if “such action was forbidden by the Constitution or by the laws” (367). “I did not usurp power,” he contended, “but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power. . . . I acted for the common well-being of all our people, whenever and in whatever manner was necessary” (Roosevelt 1921, 367). To TR, the presidency was the only political institution capable of defining the economic, political, and moral choices confronting the nation and quickly converted the office “from a passive organization into a legislative clearing-house and proposal factory” (Whittington and Carpenter 2003, 501). He contrasted his “Lincoln–Jackson” (steward) leadership model with the “Buchanan–Taft” (whig) model, which took a “narrowly legalistic view that the President is the servant of Congress rather than of the people and can do nothing, no matter how necessary it is to act unless the Constitution explicitly commands the action” (Roosevelt 1921, 372–73). Woodrow Wilson’s *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908) also saw the presidency as both definer and defender of the public interest. “Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country,” he wrote, “and no other single force can withstand him, no combination of forces will easily overpower him” (Calabresi and Yoo 2008, 254). Steward rhetoric particularly inspired progressives impatient to bypass the arcane, corrupt legislative process. Conservatives, however, believed stewardship replaced representative party government—the bedrock of political stability—with an incendiary mix of populism and executive *i*. Drawing upon the old Whig Party attacks on Andrew Jackson, they argued that Congress represented the people and should only cede power to the presidency during emergencies, such as civil war.

Senator Harding followed this precept in 1917–1918, accepting Wilson’s wartime centralization of economic and political power as an unpleasant necessity, but demanding its immediate reversal thereafter. Wilson’s refusal to involve Congress in peace negotiations or to consider Senate Majority Leader Henry Cabot Lodge’s “reservations” to the Versailles Treaty, Harding believed, justified conservative suspicions of presidential power. He also thought the president’s flawed psychology made him prone to authoritarianism and maliciously suggested to his campaign manager, Harry Daugherty, that Wilson’s debilitating stroke arose from “disappointment over anyone daring to question his authority.”<sup>1</sup> Publicly, Harding argued that “the safety of popular government lies in

1. Letter, Warren G. Harding (WGH) to Harry M. Daugherty (HMD). October 4, 1919. Harding Presidential Papers (HPP). Library of Congress. Washington, DC. Reel 28. Box 85.

Congress's asserting itself."<sup>2</sup> Wartime centralization had revealed "the narrowness of the line between autocracy and democracy. ... I can assure you that there is to be a reassertion of the power of Congress now that the peril has passed."<sup>3</sup> In the 1920 election, however, Republicans blurred the lines between anti-authoritarianism and anti-Wilson spite. Lodge, in his opening speech to the Republican convention in Chicago, declared, "The chief magistrate must understand that it is his duty not only to enforce but to abide by ... the laws made by the representatives of the people."<sup>4</sup> Comparing Wilson to French president-turned-emperor Louis Napoleon, he railed, "Mr. Wilson stands for a theory of ... government which is not American."<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Lodge, however, Harding also disapproved of TR's egotistical behavior. Wilson's arrogance sapped his own party's vitality and damaged constitutional checks and balances, but TR's effort to unseat President Taft also split the GOP and harmed its representative capacity. He vowed to reject the nomination unless Republicans promised to restore "party sponsorship which means perfect coordination between the Executive and the legislative branches."<sup>6</sup> His campaign focus on the risks of stewardship was not, therefore, purely opportunistic. He feared, with some justification, that stewardship was inherently disruptive as its power relied largely upon public discontent. He aligned himself with the traditional whig perspectives outlined by Taft in a series of lectures at Columbia University in the winter of 1915–1916. Taft's strict constructionist view of the presidency made him "something of a hero among libertarians" but antagonized progressives by restricting executive actions to those specifically mandated by the Constitution (Howell 2013, 102). Taft dismissed Roosevelt's claims of an "undefined residuum of power which he can exercise because it seems to him to be in the public interest" (Taft 1916, 140). All branches of the federal government, Taft argued, should strive for stable working relationships, within the normal constraints of partisanship. The Constitution and parties provided all the conflict-resolution mechanisms the nation needed and protected against the "uneven" performance of steward presidents.

Harding echoed these views in his July 22 acceptance speech. "No man is big enough," he declared, "to run this great Republic. There never has been one. Such domination was never intended. Let me be understood clearly from the very beginning ... I believe in party government as distinguished from personal government."<sup>7</sup> This was not, as some perceived, a call for a *weak* executive but a plea for reasonable levels of interbranch cooperation. Progressives, most of whom classed Harding as a likable, nonocctrinaire conservative, were still profoundly disappointed by his nomination. Many claimed that Republican "Old Guard" conservatives were using Harding as their puppet in order to "neuter" the presidency. His advocacy of executive self-restraint fueled these rumors to such an extent that a worried Lodge publicly promised that the party would not dictate

2. "What the New Republican Congress Intends to Do." *New York Times* (May 18, 1919), 6.

3. "Congress to Grasp Reins, Says Harding." *New York Times* (May 19, 1919), 5.

4. Address of the Temporary Chairman. *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Seventeenth Republican National Convention* (New York: The Tenny Press, 1920), 19.

5. *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Republican National Convention*, 17.

6. Letter, WGH to James Darden. August 8, 1919. HPP. Reel 28. Box 85.

7. "Republican Hopes Outlined by Lodge." *New York Herald* (July 23, 1920), 7.

to its nominee. "It is to you that we look," he told Harding in the notification ceremony, "to set forth the proper policies to be pursued by the Republican Party, both in the campaign and when charged with the responsibility of administration."<sup>8</sup> Rumors of a Senate coup persisted, however, encouraged by Republicans' relentless iconification of McKinley, whose administration seemed a golden age of political stability and executive dignity to older conservatives and offered a better whig role model than the defeated Taft. In Harding, the *Indianapolis Star* declared, Republicans had chosen a man who "looks like McKinley, acts like McKinley and thinks like McKinley."<sup>9</sup> Harry Daugherty encouraged the comparison, telling a Nebraskan committee member that Harding was "very much like McKinley in size, temperament and tendencies."<sup>10</sup> Progressives' fears grew as McKinley's shadow lengthened over the 1920 election. The twenty-fifth president, they contended, had been an affable stooge of corporatism, Congress, and "Boss" Mark Hanna. The *New Republic* warned, "To understand what he is, we have to forget all that has happened since Theodore Roosevelt became President."<sup>11</sup>

Conspiracy rumors and McKinley-worship fostered twin crises of identity and legitimacy for Harding before his administration had even begun. Democrats, progressives, and even some Republicans sought to exploit the doubts. Democrat nominee James Cox denounced the "domineering, arrogant oligarchy (which) seeks now to annex the presidency."<sup>12</sup> Columnist Mark Sullivan believed Cox's perspective was "shared, though from a different point of view ... by several of Mr. Harding's Republican fellow-Senators," who sought a "whig" president to secure congressional control of both foreign and domestic policy (Sullivan 1922, 308). Pennsylvania Senator Boies Penrose proved Sullivan's point in January 1921, telling reporters, "I don't think the Senate will take a program from any Secretary of State" (Murray 1973, 522). In summer 1920, as Harding began mixing calls for executive restraint with assurances of his personal independence, his relations with party leaders began deteriorating. When former Attorney General Philander Knox criticized his refusal to endorse *or* reject League of Nations membership, Harding hit back, "You seem to think I am so utterly lacking in sticking qualities. Maybe someday you will come to know me better."<sup>13</sup> He privately disparaged the "Old Guard," noting, "Some are very mediocre and do not deserve the power which is accredited to them."<sup>14</sup> In October, Frederick Jackson Turner, meeting Lodge, Harding, and California Senator Hiram Johnson, found them "sticking spears in each other outrageously" (Billington 1970, 314). At a late October rally in Akron, Ohio, Harding declared himself "unpledged, unowned and unbossed."<sup>15</sup> His most significant statement, however, came on December 5, in a

8. Ibid.

9. "Harding Much Like M'Kinley as G.O.P. Type." *Indianapolis Star* (June 13, 1920), 13.

10. Letter, Harry M. Daugherty to Harry S. Byrne. February 4, 1919. HPP. Reel 28. Box 85.

11. "Harding Much Like M'Kinley."

12. "Gov. Cox Hammers Senate Oligarchy and Lauds League." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (August 22, 1920), 1A.

13. Letter, WGH to Philander Knox. September 25, 1920. Philander C. Knox Papers. Library of Congress. Vol. 23. June 24, 1920–November 4, 1921. Container 23.

14. Letter, WGH to C. A. Bigler. March 19, 1920. HPP. Reel 28. Box 86.

15. "'Am Unpledged and Unbossed,' Harding Says." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 29, 1920), 3.

farewell address to the Senate. He derided talk of a Senate “regency” as “a bit of highly imaginative and harmless fiction,” confirming his intention to respect the rights of Congress but “to be just as insistent about the responsibilities of the executive. . . . Our governmental good fortune,” he observed, “does not lie in any surrender at either end of the Avenue” (Murray 1969, 94). It was his clearest public statement on *conditionality* in seeking interbranch consensus, but the warning came too late to correct the misunderstanding between party and president-elect. Republicans, sneered the *New Republic*, anticipated “the supreme opportunity to undo the work of Roosevelt and Wilson . . . they will have little mercy on Mr. Harding.”<sup>16</sup> Party leaders had hardly bothered to anticipate the nature of the new executive–legislative relationship or to take seriously Harding’s attempts to map boundaries. His signaling was too tentative and too late to counter expectations that the new “whig” administration would be partisan, unambitious—and submissive. He would disappoint on all three.

### Legislative–Executive Relations

Executive–legislative fissures emerged soon after the March 1921 inauguration. As the Republican Congress failed to heed Harding’s calls to convert the party platform into a coherent legislative timetable, the new president began referring more often to the changed institutional perspective first mentioned in his December Senate speech. He told Frank Brandegee he now held a “different position from that which I occupied as Senator. . . . I have been saying definite things to the American people and have been in a position to read their responses . . . as probably no one else in the country has been able to consider them.”<sup>17</sup> As early as May 1919, the *New York Times* had criticized the “lack of authoritative leadership” in Congress, arguing for stability under either a single, dominant figure, a Thomas B. Reed or a Joseph Cannon, or under a leadership group.<sup>18</sup> The 67th Congress possessed neither. Critical historians have blamed congressional disunity on Harding’s whiggish reluctance “to use the powers of his office or his advantage in public opinion to bring reluctant congressmen into line” (Henry 1960, 270). This simplistic view that he could achieve mastery simply by emulating TR or Wilson and cracking the executive whip reflects the broader failure to properly contextualize the Harding presidency. The 67th Congress was the most rebellious since Reconstruction. Factionalism, committee logjams, and filibusters undermined party unity. “Blocs” cooperated to kill unpopular bills, with coalitions forming and dissolving so quickly that party leaders struggled to control the legislative timetable. The anarchy quickly disillusioned Harding, who, from his “changed perspective,” denounced blocs as “a menace to the country.”<sup>19</sup> Increasingly, he used a combination of rhetorical intervention and backstairs pressure to push Congress into action and clashed with GOP leaders, particularly Lodge, over what he saw as the party’s parochialism and lack of discipline.

16. “Mr. Harding in Pain.” *The New Republic* (January 19, 1921), 213.

17. Letter, WGH to Frank Brandegee. December 20, 1920. HPP. Reel 227. Box 758.

18. “What the New Republican Congress Intends to Do.” *New York Times* (May 18, 1919), 1.

19. Letter, WGH to H.V. Jones. June 17, 1922. HPP. Reel 232. Box 770.



In May 1921, Harding interpreted a declaration by Lodge that the Versailles Treaty could not be resubmitted in any form for ratification by Congress as implying the congressional control of foreign policy. On May 4, the *New York Times* reported a contradiction from the White House. Its “oral and informal” source, it assured readers, was *not* Secretary Hughes but could be “accepted as having the sanction of the President himself.”<sup>20</sup> This obscure phrasing conventionally implied the president had spoken. Harding, who maintained an easygoing, gossipy relationship with reporters, probably gave tacit acquiescence for the “leak” during a post-Cabinet press conference. The *Times* reported it approvingly as “a pointed reminder to the Senate and the House that the foreign policies of the administration would be formulated at the White House” and a signal that “the President intends to follow his own course . . . and will resent any attempt on the Senate’s part to tell him what to do.”<sup>21</sup>

The administration also moved quickly when Idaho Senator Bill Borah called for a naval disarmament conference. Harding and Hughes were considering the idea before the inauguration but chose to wait until separate peace treaties with the defeated Central Powers had been concluded. When Borah’s amendment was passed, progressive economist Raymond Robins warned the president that Congress was “trying to force your hand.”<sup>22</sup> Harding feigned disinterest, stating “it is not of particular concern to the Administration what form the expression of Congress shall take” but, behind the scenes, told Hughes to accelerate preparations for the talks, broadening the scope of discussions and involving more nations, in order to out-flank Borah.<sup>23</sup> Although Harding was deemed “more skillful than Wilson” in minimizing isolationist opposition to the conference treaties, he was stung by Hiram Johnson’s accusation that the administration had conducted “secret diplomacy” to secure them (Trani and Wilson 1977, 154). His response, during a February 10, 1922, Senate address recommending the treaties for ratification, framed this dispute once again in terms of executive–legislative boundaries. After praising senators’ “very proper jealousy” of their ratification power, he returned to his “changed institutional perspective” theme. “To the Executive,” he claimed, “comes the closer view of world relationships and a more impressive realization of the menaces, the anxieties . . . to be met.”<sup>24</sup> The Wilsonesque suggestion that senators should remember their place failed to stop Congress from amending the Four-Power Treaty by inserting language, taken from Harding’s Senate speech, pledging that the treaty contained “no commitment to armed force, no alliance and no obligation to join in defense no expressed or implied commitment to arrive at agreement except in accordance with your constitutional methods.”<sup>25</sup> On February 18, the State Department cabled Hughes in Bermuda, warning that Johnson was now demanding the surrender of all executive records and memoranda from

20. “Flat Denial Made of Treaty Reversal by Administration.” *New York Times* (May 4, 1921), 1.

21. Ibid.

22. Letter, Raymond Robins to WGH. May 14, 1921. HPP. Reel 229. Box 762.

23. Letter, WGH to Frank Mondell. June 25, 1921. HPP. Reel 229. Box 762.

24. “President’s Speech to the Senate Submitting Treaties.” *New York Times* (February 11, 1922), 2.

25. *Comments and Reflections upon the Conference on the Limitation of Armaments and Far Eastern Questions*. Speech delivered by former Under Secretary of State Norman H. Davis to the Council on Foreign Relations. Hotel Astor, New York. February 17, 1922, 13–14. Source: Mark Sullivan Papers. Library of Congress. Box 4.

the conference. "The President," it added, "is disposed to flatly deny request."<sup>26</sup> Hughes cabled back, "President's attitude seems to me exactly right. The freedom of the executive in negotiating treaties should not be impaired by yielding to demands of this sort."<sup>27</sup> Harding wrote angrily to Lodge, "I need not tell you that I think (Johnson's demand) is utterly needless."<sup>28</sup> Having been involved in negotiations, he argued, Congress should ratify the treaties without amendment. He challenged Lodge to see the issue in constitutional terms and "have the whole question thrashed out and reach a definite conclusion whether the Executive Branch of the government may venture to negotiate treaties."<sup>29</sup> The conference's aims, he argued, were not only constitutional but conservative. If even *these* were unattainable without an embarrassing fight, "we ought to know it and guard against future exhibition of the impotency of the Executive Branch."<sup>30</sup> He restated the point in December when Borah moved an amendment to a naval appropriations bill demanding the president call a conference on European economic conditions. In a response that Hughes rated "most excellent," Harding informed Lodge: "On the face of it, it is equivalent to saying that the executive branch ... which is charged with the conduct of foreign relations, is not fully alive to a world situation which is of deep concern to the United States."<sup>31</sup> Congress, he argued, should have consulted the State Department before publicly questioning his good faith, as his administration had always been willing to share confidential information "in a spirit of cooperation."<sup>32</sup>

The president's resentment at his party's faithlessness matched his cynicism over their motivations. He privately dismissed Borah as "not sincere" and too concerned to "play the individual game of personal advancement."<sup>33</sup> "It is my strong conviction," he told Judge David Pugh, "that the greatest difficulty in making government effective at the present time ... is that so many men in public life give first consideration to ... their own popularity."<sup>34</sup> When, in December 1921, he had confessed to close friend Malcolm Jennings, "I find I cannot carry my pre-election ideals of an Executive keeping himself aloof from Congress," it was less a confession that his hopes for interbranch cooperation were misguided per se than a realization that Congress was incapable of meeting them.

During the summer of 1921, factionalism continued to block tax reform, as agrarian states prioritized tariff revision and federal agricultural subsidies. Finally persuading rebels to reduce their demands to five bills, the first two of which Harding signed on August 24, the administration waited patiently for Lodge to move ahead on tax reform.<sup>35</sup>

26. Cable, Henry P. Fletcher to Charles Evans Hughes, February 18, 1922. Library of Congress. Charles Evans Hughes Papers. Containers 5–7. Reel 4.

27. Draft cable, Charles Evans Hughes to Henry P. Fletcher, February 19, 1922. Library of Congress. Charles Evans Hughes Papers. Containers 5–7. Reel 4.

28. Letter, WGH to HCL. February 27, 1922. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Letter, WGH to HCL. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756. Memorandum: Charles Evans Hughes to WGH. December 28, 1922. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756.

32. Ibid.

33. Letter, WGH to Colonel George B. Christian. January 1, 1923. HPP. Reel 249. Box 892.

34. Letter, WGH to Judge David Pugh. November 22, 1922. HPP. Reel 230. Box 653.

35. The Futures Trading Act and Emergency Agricultural Credits Act.



Instead, rebels hijacked the timetable to prioritize another issue—cash compensation for wounded veterans. The Soldiers' Adjusted Compensation bill mandated federal payments to all ex-servicemen at a potential cost to the Treasury of \$5 billion. This, Andrew Mellon warned, would be “unfortunate in the extreme” for the administration's fiscal strategy.<sup>36</sup> Harding took a hard line from the outset, offering a compromise designed for rejection—a new sales tax to fund the bonus—before losing patience altogether. On July 12, he appeared before the Senate to demand resolution of the deadlock, insisting, “the problem is immediately yours as your unfinished business.”<sup>37</sup> Such a “menacing effort to expend billions in gratuities,” he continued, should be halted.<sup>38</sup> Alabama Democrat Pat Harrison, recalling Harding's campaign against personal leadership, suggested, “If the President has changed his mind about the wickedness of executive encroachments, he ought to make a public apology for his past utterances.”<sup>39</sup> New Mexico's Andrieus Jones saw a disturbing precedent in Harding's entering Congress solely to attack, not recommend, legislation, something even Wilson had not done.<sup>40</sup> By breaking with convention and exploiting Roosevelt's “residuum of power,” the president secured the recommittal of the bill. The dispute resurfaced in September 1922, when Lodge pressured Harding to accept a revised bonus bill, citing claims by veterans' organizations that the president's campaign promises mandated his support. Harding instructed Postmaster General Will Hays to review all his campaign speeches. “I'll give you two days to have it looked up. . . . Put enough men on the job to read every word I ever uttered” (Stoddard 1927, 472). Once sure of his ground, he tersely dismissed Lodge's arguments and vetoed the bill. It was unacceptable, he wrote, for Congress to pass costly legislation “and then leave the Executive Branch . . . to struggle with the problem of carrying (it) out.”<sup>41</sup> Efforts to override the veto failed by four votes in the Senate.

Though still holding the view that it was unwise “to encourage a scrap” with Congress “unless it is absolutely necessary in self-defense,” Harding responded aggressively to perceived slights to his authority.<sup>42</sup> His correspondence underlined his changed perspective and growing antipathy toward his party's leaders. During the 1922 midterms, Lodge faced a tough reelection battle in Massachusetts. In late September, he requested an endorsement letter from the White House. Harding's reply praised Lodge's “splendid public services” but explained that endorsements, if made at all, would be delayed until mid-October, to avoid Wilson's mistake of making the executive seem overly partisan.<sup>43</sup> Lodge conceded the point but stressed, “it certainly ought to come out by that time if I am to have it.”<sup>44</sup> A week later, he wrote again. Harding restated his position,

36. Letter, Andrew W. Mellon to Joseph E. Frelinghuysen, July 2, 1921. HPP. Box 545. Folder 7.

37. “Defer Bonus Action, Speed Tax Revision, the President Urges.” *New York Times* (July 13, 1921), 1.

38. *Ibid.*

39. “Why Harding Takes the Helm.” *Literary Digest*. Vol LXX No. 6 (August 6, 1921), 11.

40. “Delay on Bonus Is Considered to Be Assured.” *Baltimore Sun* (July 13, 1921), 1.

41. Letter, WGH to HCL (n.d.). HPP. Reel 230. Box 569.

42. Letter, WGH to W. E. Halley, January 22, 1920. HPP. Box 87.

43. Letter, WGH to HCL, September 27, 1922. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756.

44. Letter, HCL to WGH, September 29, 1922. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756.

adding obliquely, “unless something develops to change my mind.”<sup>45</sup> By October 11, he had publicly endorsed House Majority Leader Frank Mondell, but this, he told Lodge, provoked requests from countless Republican candidates across the country. “If I can persuade about a dozen applicants ... that one addressed to you ... covers the situation, I shall have no hesitancy in writing it.”<sup>46</sup> Lodge swallowed another delay but urged, “a word of ... support from you is very important to me just at this time.”<sup>47</sup> Five days later, Harding confirmed that he had written Lodge’s endorsement but had decided not to release it, to avoid “the very great embarrassment” of denying letters to other candidates.<sup>48</sup> Lodge made no comment on Harding’s equation of his status with that of any ordinary Republican candidate. He replied, without irony, “Nothing would persuade me to embarrass you in any way.”<sup>49</sup> Harding never released his endorsement.

## Cabinet Government and Institutional Reform

Observing the development of the “institutional presidency” in the mid-twentieth century, E. E. Corwin highlighted cabinet consultation, hierarchical organization, and structured decision-making procedures as key strengths of the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration. Conservatives tended to favor more “managerial” approaches to executive leadership, in contrast to the loose administrative discipline of the FDR, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton White Houses. This stemmed partly from the inherited whig emphasis on orderly, collegial decision making and partly from conservatives’ belief that increased issue complexity and bureaucratic enlargement made progressive/liberal “presidentialism” impractical. Harding’s repeated calls for bureaucratic streamlining, administrative efficiency, and the reinvigoration of cabinet government were early recognitions of these problems, but his perspectives and actions here suggest his presidency was more closely aligned, philosophically and organizationally, with the corporate conservatism of the Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan periods than with the era of McKinley and Taft.

By 1920, the *Review of Reviews* noted, many Americans had come to view the president as “some sort of universal genius” who used cabinets “merely for the routine conduct of departmental work,” while others preferred collegiality and a president “surrounded by a Cabinet made up of men of great weight and authority.”<sup>50</sup> Harding was temperamentally inclined to the latter, telling Brandegee, “I am certainly too wise to play a lone hand in this big game.”<sup>51</sup> Harding believed Wilson’s mistake was to create a cabinet so reliant upon his leadership that it could barely function during his illness. The remedy, he suggested, was to adjust the president’s role to that of Cabinet “chairman”—less involved in

45. Letter, WGH to HCL. October 6, 1922. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756.

46. Letter, WGH to HCL. October 11, 1922. HPP. Reel 227. Box 756.

47. Letter, HCL to WGH. October 17, 1922. Reel 227. Box 756.

48. Letter, WGH to HCL. October 22, 1922. Reel 227. Box 756.

49. Letter, HCL to WGH. October 25, 1922. Reel 227. Box 756.

50. “Conceptions of the Presidency.” *The American Review of Reviews*. Vol. LXII. No. 1 (July 1920), 12.

51. Letter, WGH to Frank Brandegee. December 20, 1920. HPP. Reel 227. Box 758.

defining and executing policies than in outlining broad goals, facilitating discussion, adjudicating disputes, and providing political advice and support in departments' relations with Congress—an area the president considered his specialism. Cynics' suggestions that Harding simply sought to compensate for his own ignorance were not entirely without foundation, as Mark Sullivan hinted in speculating that Harding's ideal chief executive was “a man who . . . adopts what is decided upon by the board of directors and always works with the sense of responsibility to them as the final source of power.”<sup>52</sup> Abdication of presidential authority was *not*, however, what Harding had in mind. He did not share progressives' expectations of an unbroken succession of intellectually and politically astute presidents and preferred to encourage government-wide structural reform, expanding federal authority in some areas, reducing it in others, while increasing the input from nonpartisan experts in policy making. Atop this structure would sit a cabinet of “best minds,” supportive of the president and dedicated to a policy program based upon, though not necessarily slavishly loyal to, the party platform. Ironically, Harding's aspirations echoed Wilson's pre-1913 writings, which, as Robert Eden points out, advocated releasing presidents from mundane executive tasks to focus their energies on shaping public opinion and building support coalitions. Thus, Wilson argued, “the President may be said to administer the presidency in conjunction with the members of his cabinet *like the chairman of a commission*. He is even . . . much less active in the actual carrying out of the law than are his colleagues and advisors” (Eden 1996, 366, author's italics). Although Wilson's personality and wartime centralization sidetracked this idea, Harding revived it as a response to the crisis of executive power Wilson himself engineered. In some ways, Harding was more likely to succeed where Wilson failed. Unlike many of his conservative contemporaries, he shared progressives' admiration for “experts,” even politically disinterested ones, who would improve the quality and coherence of policy making.<sup>53</sup> Also, unlike many former congressional colleagues, he did not oppose presidentialism per se. Despite his campaign rhetoric, he acknowledged the impossibility of restoring Gilded Age institutional boundaries and somewhat admired the bold activism of Roosevelt and Wilson. They had erred, he believed, by arrogantly disregarding systemic checks and balances and fostering party and institutional crises that left the presidency vulnerable to counterattack by Congress. His hope, therefore, was twofold: first, to restore political stability and blunt the edge of the congressional backlash by encouraging interbranch cooperation and, second, to protect presidential prestige, while facilitating the continued, carefully measured, growth of executive authority. Inevitably, the pursuit of the first goal often threatened the success of the second, but it is still remarkable that Harding, given his poor historical reputation, made such an effort *at all*. His perspective on cabinet government differed from Wilson's chiefly on the role of departmental heads. Eden, describing Wilson's approach, explains, “The executive functions of government . . . can therefore be delegated to energetic lackeys or messenger-boys” (Eden 1996, 370). In Harding's case, however, the keyword was “energetic” rather than “lackeys.” Aside from some inevitable partisan appointments—John Weeks and Edwin Denby to the War and Navy

52. “Senate Control of White House.” *The Atlanta Constitution* (June 27, 1920), 5.

53. “Harding's Fad Is for Teamwork at Washington.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (July 8, 1920), 5.

departments, Albert Fall at Interior—and the unwise gift of the Justice Department to his close friend Daugherty—he sought activists with direct or related expertise in their allotted government roles. His choices revealed a steward's inclination for activism, even if his rhetoric was consensual and his policies conservative.<sup>54</sup> The Cabinet was built around a core group—Charles Evans Hughes at the State Department, Andrew Mellon as treasury secretary, Henry Wallace at Agriculture, Herbert Hoover at Commerce, and Charles Dawes as director of the Bureau of the Budget—which lent his administration a striking aura of talent and purpose, but of only weak partisanship. He expected protests over his appointments but dismissed out-of-hand Daugherty's warnings of party discontent, commenting, "The opposition of a number of the men mentioned in your letter does not very deeply impress me."<sup>55</sup> He also upbraided Brandegee for the "semblance of panic and lack of confidence" among congressional Republicans.<sup>56</sup> In office, he sided mostly with his Cabinet in disputes with Congress, while Daugherty, the chief promoter of the 1920 "McKinley–Harding" comparison, became isolated from decision making. Had Harding been a true whig, his appointments would have been strongly partisan and met with conservative approval in Congress. Instead, the Cabinet selection process of 1920–1921 was one of the most contentious ever endured by an incoming president. Harding's Cabinet seemed intentionally designed—even before the extent of Republican disunity became apparent—to insulate the presidency from congressional pressure and enable it to chart its own course. Journalists speculated, correctly, that Hughes—a moderate internationalist with formidable legal and political experience—was chosen in order to counter isolationist influence on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations because "it would be a wholesome thing if the domination exercised by that body were curbed."<sup>57</sup> Hughes proved a staunch advocate of executive foreign policy prerogatives and an administrative reformer, reorganizing the State Department to create new regional divisions that "greatly enhanced its capacity to deal with foreign affairs on a global scale" (Pusey 1951, 418). Mellon, a Pittsburgh millionaire with no experience of political office and little interest in partisan politics, was chosen as a strong proponent of debt and tax reduction capable of resisting congressional raids on government funds. Henry Wallace's calls for federal solutions to agricultural problems and his entrenched "prejudice against capital" disturbed conservatives, as did the "big government" impulses of Herbert Hoover (Winters 1967, 115). Formerly Wilson's wartime relief organizer, Hoover was a political neophyte distrusted by party regulars. He advocated a new, cooperative relationship between government and business, reducing the need for overarching government control but also *increasing* government activity in the economic sphere and regulating predatory behavior among businesses. With Harding's express endorsement, national planning of commerce and industry became an administration priority, with 17 new departmental divisions contributing to the extension of government influence in trade and commerce during the

54. "Harding Confirms Hoover Selection for Cabinet Place." *Washington Evening Star* (February 25, 1921), 1.

55. Letter, WGH to Harry Daugherty. February 9, 1921. HPP. Reel 227. Box 758.

56. Letter, WGH to Frank Brandegee. December 20, 1920.

57. "President Harding's Cabinet." *Fortnightly Review*. Vol. 115. Part 1. (April 21, 1921), 533.

1920s. Harding, delighted with Hoover's innovative and expansive strategies and unconcerned at the spread of Commerce Department influence into more and more areas of the nation's economic life, famously referred to his commerce secretary as "the smartest gink I know" (Palmer 2006, 31). In the unreconstructed whig administration of Calvin Coolidge, Hoover was mistrusted as the "wonder boy" (Palmer 2013, 182). Coolidge shared the fear of older conservatives that Hoover's rise heralded a future in which "government no longer belongs so much to the governed as to the governors."<sup>58</sup>

Harding thus aimed to mobilize administrative energy and policy expertise to the executive's advantage, reducing the need for presidential interventions in daily government business and freeing him to focus on the political and promotional aspects of leadership he felt more qualified to handle. In this way, he accelerated trends that rendered the president "more and more a political and less and less an executive officer" (Eden 1996, 367). Accepting that Wilson's theory of an "elevated" presidency, implemented through the Best Minds project, was similar to Harding's concept of presidential leadership, it becomes clear that he intended to use his rhetorical and political abilities—the skill set of Wilson's liberated chief executive—to offset his sometimes erratic grasp of policy detail. This approach was later adopted by both Eisenhower and Reagan. Unlike Wilson, however, Harding maintained his whiggish rhetoric while presiding over a core team of departmental "stewards," thus moving the presidency away from dependence upon one personality without weakening either its policy-making capability or its recently acquired status as articulator of the national interest.

The Best Minds project ran parallel with Harding's broader aims for government "rationalization," which sought better administrative coordination and cost efficiency. His message to the Academy of Political Science in 1921, declaring, "the fact that a thing has existed for a decade or a century must not be accepted as proving that it ought to continue that way" indicates a difference between his reform-minded conservatism and traditionalists like McKinley, Taft, or Coolidge (Harding 1921, 102). Taft had flirted with budget reform in 1910, on the grounds that the executive was a better calculator of appropriations than Congress, but otherwise mistrusted the inexorable growth of government. Harding was more sanguine and willing to use the presidency to promote a wave of organizational reform involving plans for new government departments, a reformed vice presidency, and an overhaul of the executive branch itself. His first address to Congress, on April 12, 1921, cited poor coordination and waste as reasons to centralize the Federal Board for Vocational Training, the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, and other agencies into one large veterans' bureau. He also supported the creation of a Department of Public Welfare to focus federal influence on social policy. In 1922, he recommended appropriations of \$1,240,000.00 for federal "promotion of the welfare and hygiene of maternity and infancy" after passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act.<sup>59</sup> Harding also supported extending federal regulation of the infant radio and aircraft industries. As Hawley

58. Ray T. Tucker, "Is Hoover Human?" *North American Review*. Vol. 226. No. 5 (November 1928), 515.

59. Expenditure recommendation to Congress. HPP. Reel 193. Box 609. Harding supported the landmark 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act, despite the American Medical Association's view of it as "socialistic."

notes, Harding gave Commerce to Hoover on the understanding not only that Hoover would revolutionize its structure and expand its reach into agricultural, labor, financial, and foreign affairs, but also that the president would guarantee to support Hoover's innovations against congressional attack (Hawley 1974, 118–19). His outlook was, therefore, considerably more active interventionist than that of any post-1865 Republican administration, save Roosevelt's. Government power under Harding, Walter Dodd noted in March 1923, continued to increase "step by step with the enormous increase in the transactions to be controlled" (Dodd 1923, 452–53).

The president also took a personal interest in the Joint Committee on the Reorganization of the Executive Branch of the Government—created in 1920 to improve departmental coordination and congressional oversight powers. In an unprecedented executive intervention, Harding placed his personal representative, Walter F. Brown, on the committee and sought to make him chairman, backing off only when GOP Senator Reed Smoot warned that congressional hostility to a perceived executive takeover might sink the project. Brown eventually took the chair and, encouraged by Harding, hijacked the reorganization process, freezing out congressional committee members and developing his own reform proposals. On January 22, 1922, Harding secured his goal of an executive-centric report recommending reforms, which, Peri Arnold notes, "would lead to an executive branch more amenable to management from above" (1981, 589). Among other innovations, the new Budget Bureau would escape Treasury direction and come under direct presidential control (something Wilson had sought); a Department of National Defense would absorb the War and Navy departments; and a Department of Education and Public Welfare would increase federal intervention in social policy.<sup>60</sup> Brown worked partly with Dawes and Hoover in developing the plan, which, he later explained, would not only relieve the president of intolerable administrative burdens accrued as government transformed into a "colossal machine" from the late nineteenth century, but also counter Congress's anarchic tendency to "create independent executive establishments reporting directly to the president rather than bureaus under departments attached to a cabinet official."<sup>61</sup> Brown's secretive approach, however, drew predictable congressional complaints of a lack of consultation and some opposition from within Harding's Cabinet.<sup>62</sup> Although Congress refused to consider the proposals, Brown's ideas partly underpinned the later landmark reorganization recommended by the Brownlow commission in 1937.

Centralizing budgeting responsibilities in the executive would, over the long term, profoundly affect the balance of power between Congress and the White House. As Irene Rubin notes, one of the key drivers for budgeting reform had been the need for greater efficacy in regulating procedures (1993, 441). Because legislation creating the bureau was passed under Wilson, Harding could only be "a follower, not a leader" in this field, but he understood its potential impact on the executive–legislative power balance in strengthening executive control over fiscal policy, while cutting government jobs, thus reducing

60. "Reorganisation Plans in President's Hands." *Baltimore Sun* (January 22, 1922), 30.

61. "Four Assistants to Presidents Urged." *New York Times* (September 2, 1923), 132.

62. "Reports to Harding on Reorganization." *New York Times* (January 22, 1922), 20.



scope for party patronage (Murray 1969, 173). Rather than blunting the impact of the reform or proceeding with caution to avoid offending Congress, Harding tapped the hyperactive Charles Dawes to run the bureau and supported a program of radical cuts, over protests from congressional committees which, until then, had set annual appropriations. Congress feared total executive control of federal finances through enhanced data gathering, resource distribution, and communication techniques. Dawes demanded that all department heads submit expenditure estimates, publicly rebuking them for failing to meet bureau targets or for requesting supplemental appropriations. The president's determination to make deep budget cuts overrode even Hoover's private warning that "wise expenditure by the Government is not only more fruitful but critically necessary."<sup>63</sup> The president answered blandly, "I know full well that ... it is a false economy to pinch the funds available for needed service" but made no move to restrain Dawes.<sup>64</sup> Harding shared Henry Stimson's cynical view of Congress as "an aggregation of log-rolling units."<sup>65</sup> "Whenever the government makes a showing of reduced expense," the president complained, "somebody in Congress conceives that the money saved ought to be expended."<sup>66</sup> The budget strategy provided a long-term stimulant to presidential power. The Harding administration executed one of the century's sharpest fiscal policy reversals, reducing government expenditure from \$5,538,000,000 to \$3,697,000,000 over three years (Sullivan 1935, 209). Dawes undercut existing appropriations so deeply that Congress, having once attacked Wilson's "profligacy," now struggled to justify its own estimates. The presidency increasingly held the whip hand in fiscal policy. Moreover, the *manner* in which Harding wielded this new authority leaned sharply in the direction of stewardship, emphasizing "a Progressive sensibility of managerial efficiency" even as it bit deeply into the budget (Whittington and Carpenter 2003, 506). It also served to emphasize the distance Harding was deliberately placing between his administration's goals and congressional partisanship. He seemed prepared, Murray observes, to "crucify his party on the cross of fiscal integrity if necessary" (Murray 1969, 73). As Don Price notes, war and personal ambition stimulated "positive executive leadership" under Lincoln and Wilson, but the administrative support needed to convert these temporary advances into permanent institutional superiority was lacking (1958, 167). The success of the Harding administration's budget strategy strengthened executive influence over fiscal policy for the next half-century (Hager and Sullivan 1994, 1083).

Harding's interest in institutional reform extended to the vice presidency. Since the 1830s, party conventions had chosen vice presidential nominees and few presidents had working relationships with their deputies. Wilson's tutelage of Thomas Marshall was so inadequate that Marshall feared himself unqualified to be president should Wilson die. Harding considered this an absurd and potentially dangerous situation and included the vice presidency in his pledge to ensure government decisions "rest upon the broad base of more than one intelligence" (Anonymous 1921, 21). The vice president, he told reporters

63. Letter, Herbert Hoover to WGH. May 6, 1921. HPP. Reel 229. Box 761.

64. Letter, WGH to Herbert Hoover. May 12, 1921. HPP. Reel 229. Box 761.

65. Letter, Henry L. Stimson to WGH. February 10, 1923. HPP. Reel 232. Box 771.

66. Letter, WGH to Walt Mason. February 10, 1922. HPP. Reel 232. Box 70.

at a June 1920 press conference, should be “more than a mere substitute in waiting ... [he] ... can and ought to play a big part” (McCoy 1967, 123). Tellingly, his preference for the post was Wisconsin’s progressive senator, Irvine Lenroot, whose temperament and 11 years of experience in national politics suited Harding’s own inclination toward a proactive executive working closely with Congress. Unfortunately, convention delegates chose Calvin Coolidge, an old-fashioned whig possessing neither national experience nor reforming instincts. Nevertheless, Harding hoped to integrate Coolidge into the Best Minds project, declaring his intention to build “a Cabinet of highest capacity ... in whose councils, the Vice President ... shall be asked to participate.”<sup>67</sup> He dismissed warnings that vice presidents, as presiding officers in the Senate, should not be too closely involved in policy making. “I confess I smile at all of you who take a fling at this proposition,” he wrote Brandegee. “I do not believe it will hurt ... matters to have the Vice President express his views. He is the second official of the Republic. It may prove to be a miserable failure. If it is so, no great harm has been done.”<sup>68</sup> Harding envisaged the vice president as a useful tool for smoothing relations between executive and legislature. He may also have considered giving his deputy more administrative responsibilities—a change initiated more than 30 years later by Eisenhower. Unfortunately, Coolidge showed no interest in expanding his role and rarely contributed to Cabinet discussions, despite Harding’s encouragement (Pusey 1951, 426). The two men never developed a close personal or political relationship, and Harding eventually dropped the idea.

By late 1922, Congress was drifting and the GOP disunited but Harding remained popular and respected for having, as William Jennings Bryan commented, “surpassed all expectations.”<sup>69</sup> On March 4, 1922, the *New York Times* concurred, “It would be unjust to fail to note ... that one of the achievements of President Harding’s administration has been Mr. Harding himself.”<sup>70</sup> Eight months earlier, the *Literary Digest* had suggested Harding’s “theoretical abhorrence of executive interference and one-man power” meant his bouts of assertiveness were “thrust upon him in spite of his temperament.”<sup>71</sup> This was not entirely true. Harding enjoyed wielding the rhetorical power of the presidency to appeal to public opinion and influence debate and made it a consistent feature of his leadership. Mark Sullivan perhaps came closer to the mark in suggesting that Harding had deliberately lowered public expectations in 1920 in order to outperform them, thus maximizing public and press good will, from which the presidency could draw political energy.

The decision to deliver his first message to Congress in person had been deliberately symbolic. James Ceaser identified Wilson’s use of oratory “to create an active public opinion” as the fundamental change that distinguished the new stewardship presidency from the old whig model (Ceaser et al. 1981, 162). For a whig president determined to erase outward manifestations of steward leadership, reviving the pre-Wilson tradition of

67. “Warren G. Harding. Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination.” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=76198>.

68. Letter, WGH to Frank Brandegee. December 20, 1920.

69. Letter, William Jennings Bryan to WGH. November 14, 1921. HPP. Reel 227. Box 758.

70. “One Year of Harding.” *New York Times* (March 4, 1922) 10.

71. *Literary Digest*, “Why Harding Takes the Helm,” 12.

having presidential messages read out by clerks would have been an obvious gesture. Harding, however, preferred the stewardship style and made regular appearances, both scheduled and unexpected, before Congress. In September 1921, he lectured a segregated audience in Birmingham, Alabama, on the importance of equal political and legal rights for black citizens. Jabbing his finger toward the audience's white section, he declared, "Unless our democracy is a lie, you must stand for that equality."<sup>72</sup> The speech provoked anger in southern newspapers but was praised by black political leaders as the strongest presidential speech on civil rights since Reconstruction. This unexpected declaration was partly designed to pacify black leaders' demands that the president publicly support passage of the Dyer anti-lynching bill, which was threatened in Congress by a southern filibuster. Harding also hoped to undermine the Democrats' electoral grip on the south. The fact that he took no further action indicated the pragmatic, if sometimes uncourageous, limits to his use of rhetorical interventions. Having deliberately stirred a hornets' nest, he bowed to the filibuster in order to salvage his legislative timetable. Three months later, he ordered the release of most antiwar activists jailed under Wilson, including former socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs, over protests from Congress members. The clemency gesture at Christmas attracted widespread press attention, contrasting Harding's generosity of spirit favorably with that of his congressional critics. Here, as with the Birmingham and bonus speeches, Harding used steward-style "gesture politics" to focus press attention on the presidency. Georgia Democrat Tom Watson suspected this in his reference to the bonus intervention as "a dramatic performance," adding, in words reminiscent of Lodge in 1920, "that kind of personal rule is absolutely antagonistic to our form of government."<sup>73</sup> The *New York Times*, however, applauded Harding's assertiveness, comparing his sudden change in dress from white summer flannels to dark gray suit, hours before the bonus speech, to illustrate his ability to change swiftly from consensual politician to stern leader. "President Harding is a lightning change artist," it noted approvingly. "He gave an instance today of how quickly he is able to doff one suit of clothes and don another."<sup>74</sup>

During Harding's administration, particularly in its second half, executive interventions and clashes with Congress reached almost Wilsonian levels, with the president, in H. L. Mencken's words, "rocking his own boat so violently that many of his most faithful partisans were coming down with *mal-de-mer*" (1984, 69). In 1922, he criticized Congress again, in an angry speech demanding passage of an administration priority—a shipping subsidies bill that had been stalled for months. He also used a State of the Union address to advocate a constitutional amendment banning child labor. This response to continued pressure to act after the Supreme Court's 1918 rejection of the Keating–Owen Act seemed to echo progressive views that unpopular judicial decisions could be overruled by popular sentiment, stirred by the president. Though progressives argued

72. "Harding Says Negro Must Have Equality in Political Life." *New York Times* (October 27, 1921), 1.

73. Congressional Record–Senate (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1922). July 13, 1921. 3654.

74. "Harding in a Quick Change." *New York Times* (July 13, 1921), 8.

pursuing a constitutional amendment was akin to kicking the issue into the long grass, Harding's approach was similar to that taken over the Dyer anti-lynching bill. Facing intractable obstacles, such as a southern filibuster or a Supreme Court ruling, he chose not to ignore the issues but to use the "bully pulpit" to galvanize reform efforts. "We ought to amend to meet the demands of the people," he declared, "when sanctioned by deliberate public opinion."<sup>75</sup>

The president also shared Wilson's habit of publicizing not only himself but also federal government activities. He actively encouraged and appeared at stage-managed events, such as an unemployment conference in Washington hosted by Herbert Hoover. On his orders, the 1921 disarmament conference was thrown open to journalists, ensuring that saturation coverage of his opening address pushed isolationist criticisms off the front pages. He also collaborated with Dawes on a very public launch for the new Budget Bureau in the Interior Department's auditorium on June 29, 1921. With the full Cabinet seated behind him on the platform, Harding sternly noted that "no efficiency and no economy are ever to be thought of in public expense," adding, "We want to reverse things" (Sullivan 1935, 209). Dawes announced the administration's goal of a 25% cut in expenditure across all departments, warning Cabinet members, "I have the powers of the president to get the facts."<sup>76</sup> He then led six hundred bureau chiefs and deputies in a bizarre "pledge of allegiance" to Harding and fiscal rectitude. This theatricality amused reporters but also magnified the event's media impact, underscoring both the power of the executive and Harding's personal authority.

The development of organized public relations as an adjunct of presidential power thus accelerated. In this, as in his statements on the constitutional prerogatives of the executive and references to his "unique" perspective as president, Harding consistently performed as a steward, rather than a whig. History accords him little recognition for his unconventional approach to media relations. The tradition of regular, twice-weekly press conferences began with Harding and differed radically from Wilson's formalized, scripted style. Meetings were peppered with banter, gossip, and off-the-record comments, which reporters found helpful in pursuing stories. Frederick Essary, of the *Baltimore Sun*, recalled, "This cross-fire between the head of our government and representatives of the press was a matter of ... some astonishment to foreign newspaper men" (1928, 905). Harding's off-the-cuff interplay with journalists boldly removed many of the barriers of etiquette and tradition between president and press that TR and Wilson had carefully preserved. FDR made the relaxation permanent, but it was Harding who pioneered it. A gaffe in interpreting the disarmament conference treaties made Harding more circumspect, but he continued to "exhibit" the presidency more frequently than any of his predecessors, posing for photographers outside the White House with film actors, sporting legends, and visiting schoolchildren. In October 1922, he became the first president to receive an entire college football team.<sup>77</sup> Requests for presidential radio messages were,

75. Warren G. Harding, "Second Annual Message," December 8, 1922. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29563>.

76. "Let's Go from Here—Dawes to Bureau Chiefs." *Chicago Tribune* (June 30, 1921), 3.

77. Wesley Stout, "White House Newsreel." *Saturday Evening Post* (January 26, 1955), 80.

however, discouraged by the president's staff since, as Secretary George Christian recalled, "he would have been engaged practically all the time making radio speeches, from lunch-time in Maine to the banquet hour at Los Angeles."<sup>78</sup> In spring 1921, Harding invited William Crawford, of *The World's Work*, to spend a day shadowing the president as he conducted business in the White House—pioneering a "behind-the-scenes" technique usually credited by historians to Eisenhower's "open" Cabinet meeting in December 1953. Predictably, Crawford repaid this unprecedented access with a glowing account of Harding's modesty, heavy work routine, and simple humanity in cussing under his breath at a bad golf stroke. Though some complained that Harding's accessibility demeaned the office, columnist Frank Lowry thought it "effective publicity and quite legitimate."<sup>79</sup> By 1926, Harding's advancement of the "rhetorical presidency," as much as Roosevelt's or Wilson's, prompted political scientist Lindsay Rogers to warn that media manipulation threatened to tilt the political power balance permanently in favor of the presidency (Ponder 1999, 123).

## Conclusion

As Crockett observes, the tools and options available to presidents rest upon "a foundation of larger forces already in place" when they take office (2000, 246). Assuming office in 1921, at a time of postwar economic and political disorientation, Harding confronted "larger forces," which were rewriting political, economic, and societal rules at breakneck speed—a nationalized news media, a surging capitalist economy, and exponential growth in the size and power of the executive as the government struggled to meet complex socioeconomic challenges. The tools to meet these challenges, however, had been badly damaged, and options for executive action were unusually limited. Part of the blame for the resultant interbranch friction lay with Harding himself. Although he preferred party government to presidential dominance, he refused to surrender those elements of the proto-modern presidency, developed under TR and Wilson, which he considered necessary tools for governance. The general assumption that Harding was an old-style whig, reluctant to use executive power and wedded to outdated political assumptions, is not supported by the evidence. More frequently than his Republican successors, Coolidge and Hoover, he asserted executive prerogatives and supported reforms, including those broadening executive power. Cabinet government, the search for administrative cohesion, and the effort to control economic policy and coordinate department messaging on spending and debt as part of an ideologically cohesive fiscal program heralded an activist, business-oriented conservatism that served as a short-lived prototype for the later Eisenhower and Reagan presidencies.<sup>80</sup> The informality of Harding's press rela-

78. Letter, George Christian to Walter Williams. (n.d.). HPP. Reel 229, Box 762.

79. Edward G. Lowry, "Mr. Harding Digging In." *The New Republic* (May 18, 1921), 341.

80. In the 1980s, with Harding's name tarnished by scandal, Reagan publicly associated himself with Coolidge. Politically, however, there was little resemblance between them. Harding's administration was the true political antecedent to the Reagan era.

tions, which neither TR nor Wilson permitted, presaged their permanent relaxation under FDR. Further, unlike Taft, Coolidge, or Hoover, Harding fully exploited opportunities to keep the presidency at the forefront of public debates, manipulate press headlines, and maintain his popularity by distancing his administration from congressional foot-dragging. He sincerely “meant all that I have said about restoring (interbranch) coordination,” but, encountering congressional opposition, he instinctively appealed directly to the “surging, diverse and increasingly interconnected” electorate, thus increasing pressure on Congress<sup>81</sup> (Greenberg 2011, 25). Harding’s language, particularly toward Congress, exemplified his unexpectedly firm defense of constitutional boundaries. Provocative use of phrases such as “*your* unfinished business,” attacks on spendthrift committees and the “menace” of blocs, the consistent framing of clashes with Congress as impermissible challenges to presidential authority, and his often brusque dismissal of criticism all indicate Harding’s determination to counter any effort to diminish the presidency. This defiance was not applied uniformly, nor was it always successful, but, between March 1921 and August 1923, executive assertiveness existed at levels reminiscent of the Wilson era and not seen again until the arrival of Franklin Roosevelt. For that, the presidency of Warren G. Harding deserves some credit.

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81. Letter, WGH to Frank Brandegee. December 20, 1920.



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